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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the effectiveness of the Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) program in equipping graduate students for the realities of the academic job market. It reviews the experiences of Duke University (North Carolina) with the PFF program and the effect that PFF has had on preparing graduate students to enter the job market as new faculty. The paper reviews the lessons learned from the program, including the fact that PFF does not "corrupt" students to exclude research universities from their employment horizon, that it contributes to substantive changes in how students think about their professional development, that most graduate faculty have very little first-hand experience with the realties of the current academic job market, and that most graduate students know very little about the routine operations of academic institutions and about the day-to-day life of faculty members in those institutions. It notes that PFF is based on the principle that the more graduate students learn through direct experience about the multiple roles faculty members serve in different academic institutions, the greater their understanding of the kinds of investments necessary to fulfill those responsibilities and the better faculty they will be. (MDM)

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PREPARING FUTURE FACULTY

THE LESSONS OF PFF CONCERNING THE JOB MARKET

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A SERIES OF OCCASIONAL PAPERS

Those of you who have followed the increasingly sharp responses of graduate students to the World Wide Web forum on "The future of the Ph.D." in science and engineering will appreciate that making generalizations about the job market these days is very risky business. Similarly, with a growing number of studies like the recent Committee on Science, Education, and Public Policy (COSEPUP) report on the science Ph.D., it is also getting harder to distinguish the "lessons" of one project from those of another. Still, PFF has made some things about the job market a little clearer, and it has offered some specific strategies that I believe can help graduate students fare better in this market.

Because Duke University also participated in a previous version of the PFF project between 1990 and 1992, we have a somewhat longer history than most of how such projects can affect the employment of doctoral students, although, unfortunately, even our history is not long enough to answer the crucial question of whether PFF can help junior faculty achieve tenure.

Over the five years that we have been collaborating with neighboring institutions, some seventy-six students from nine different graduate departments have participated in our project. Roughly half of these students have now graduated, and nearly all have found academic employment: nine have positions at Research I Institutions; nine in Comprehensive Universities; sixteen at Liberal Arts Colleges. These numbers are roughly comparable to placements for the graduate school as a whole over the past five years—80 percent of Duke Ph.D.s find degree-related employment; 50 percent have academic positions; and 23 percent have positions at research institutions broadly defined—and they therefore serve as the resource base for my comments here.

I want also to note that in the following remarks I have assumed that the term "job market" refers first to a variety of academic options available to new doctoral students; second, to strategies of self-presentation that those students need to master in order to get a job offer; and third, to local expectations that they will have to meet in order to keep that job. These three aspects of the market are not self-evident to the budding Ph.D. who may, for example, never have attended and probably never considered a career in the exploding community college system; never realized that faculty members at the small liberal arts colleges could care less about the arcane subtleties of a dissertation subject; and never thought about the different ways teaching can be evaluated or weighed at various academic institutions. The "job market," in short, encompasses curricular and other choices graduate students make while pursuing their doctoral degrees, institutions to which they will apply at the end of their formal education, ways they put themselves forward during the application and interview processes, and investments or commitments they make in order to achieve ultimate career success. I want to argue that PFF offers lessons for every stage of this process.

PFF has made substantive changes in how students think about their professional development, particularly by encouraging them to guard against too narrow a set of intellectual or research interests.

The first lesson, then, that we have learned from PFF is that it does not "corrupt" students. In the initial years of the project, graduate faculty members were extremely hostile to anything they thought would steer students away from careers in research institutions. Now it is true that for some PFF students, experiences on a liberal arts or comprehensive university campus either convinced or reminded them that this was their preferred career goal; for others, such experiences confirmed that the research institution was their real home. In neither case did PFF fundamentally change students' basic career orientations. What it did do, for both participating students and their graduate advisors, was give them a better sense of, and a far greater professional respect for, the range of academic institutions in this country.

PFF has made substantive changes, moreover, in how students think about their professional development, particularly by encouraging them to guard against too narrow a set of intellectual or research interests. Many Duke students speak eloquently about how their relations with faculty mentors at the cluster campuses reminded them that specialized research need not be opposed to broad disciplinary or interdisciplinary interests, and that some career trajectories demand both. It has also led them to seek out, wherever possible, a variety of teaching opportunities, and to experiment more actively and reflectively with various pedagogical approaches, including those involving innovative technologies. Finally, PFF has introduced and promoted special attention to dossier building, most dramatically, I think, in terms of teaching portfolios that are becoming increasingly more important for faculty positions at liberal arts colleges and other teaching institutions. So my second lesson would argue that PFF helps students select both course work and teaching opportunities that not only enrich their graduate training, but also keep them competitive for the full range of academic employment.

The third lesson we have learned from PFF is that the graduate faculty—even when they work hard helping students prepare for the job market, conducting mock interviews, and so forth—have very little first-hand experience of the realities of this market. What I mean here is simply that graduate advisors, and consequently the advice they offer students about how to write cover letters, prepare vitae, and conduct themselves on campus visits, simply do not match the specific expectations of at least 80 percent of the schools in which our students have a chance at employment.

Every time I return from an evening at one of our sister institutions during which PFF students talk with cluster faculty members about what they look for in a job application or in the on-campus interview, I hear: "Boy, I wish my dissertation advisor had heard that conversation." I sympathize with the students' shock at how narrow the experience of their graduate advisors has been, and appreciate anew how critical their mentoring relation with a cluster campus faculty member has become in helping them prepare for the job search. Time and again, our PFF students have said they felt their experiences at the cluster campuses put them three steps ahead of their peers in terms of what they know about different institutions, about the basic features of academic life and faculty responsibilities at those institutions, about what kinds of faculty committees will likely be interviewing them, and about what those committees will be most interested in learning from them. PFF, in short, gives students experiences that empower them in job market interviews.

The payoffs here for our students are tangible and important, even if they aren't very profound. It makes a huge difference to the success of an on-campus interview to understand that you will be talking to a broad group of faculty members who are concerned with how you present the primary content and methodologies of your discipline, not with a select group of departmental peers interested in the argument of your latest dissertation chapter. Similarly, the preparations for conducting a senior seminar, a general education class, a departmental lecture, or a talk to an entire college faculty are all quite different. PFF helps students prepare for and negotiate these differences.

PFF is based on the principle that the more graduate students learn through direct experience about the multiple roles faculty members serve in different academic institutions, the greater their understanding of the kinds of investments necessary to fulfill those responsibilities and the better faculty they will be at any of these schools. Negatively phrased, the fourth employment lesson of PFF is how little most graduate students know about the routine operations of academic institutions and about the day-to-day life of faculty members in those institutions. Graduate students grow up in departments, and yet they know very little about how departments really operate and next to nothing about broader institutional policies, procedures, or problems. They don't know what provosts or chancellors do; they don't understand natural tensions between administrators and faculty members; they have never had to think about such institutional issues as core curricula or general education requirements. They may know much more than their professors about a particular subdiscipline, but astonishingly little about the intellectual, financial, or governance issues of the institutions to which they hope to devote the rest of their working lives. We expect that they will somehow receive this knowledge by osmosis, but they don't.

IT makes a huge difference to the success of an on-campus interview to understand that you will be talking to a broad group of faculty who are concerned with how you present the primary content and methodologies of your discipline, not with a select group of departmental peers interested in the argument of your latest dissertation chapter.

Unless we make a special effort through projects like PFF, virtually every important feature of the academy will remain mysterious to the new Ph.D. For most, it will take many years on the job to learn even basic institutional information. The fifth lesson of PFF is that this is wasted time. Important institutional knowledge—including practical advice on both the general and the local levels for such topics as benefits options, typical pedagogical and advising resources, service requirements, strategies to conserve personal and family time, tenure expectations and strategies, methods of coping with departmental politics, basic problems facing the academy today—this knowledge can be delivered to graduate students in ways that will enable them to move swiftly and effectively into their new faculty roles.

PFF, I think, has proved the most effective program for delivering this information, and its success, I would argue, can be attributed to the broad range of professional faculty role models our interinstitutional collaborations make available to the graduate student. Successfully preparing future faculty for a complex and difficult job market is simply not something that any single institution—and certainly not any single faculty mentor—can do alone.

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CGS

The Council of Graduate Schools is an organization of institutions of higher education in North America engaged in graduate education, research, scholarship, and the preparation of candidates for advanced degrees. Its membership includes 410 universities, granting 97 percent of doctoral degrees awarded in the United States.

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